

**Sociology Student Forum
13:00-14:30, 22 March 2017**

Participants: 7 students, 2 staff members (with some early departures)

1. **Degree structure:** Students were invited to comment on the curriculum and reflect on how degree requirements allowed them to develop academic skills and critical thinking.

Comments on required courses and methods training:

- Students agreed that the curriculum offered a solid background in critical thinking.
- Some students felt that there was a big jump between 2nd to 3rd year; the standards were suddenly much higher standard which required some adjustments.
- Students expressed interest in taking an advanced qualitative methods course.
- Students appreciate the exposure to quantitative and qualitative approaches in Soc 2b but would welcome even more guidance on the final assessment.
- DDSR provides an effective structure (regular presentations) for cumulative feedback at different stages of proposal preparation.
- One student sent the following comment over email about the possible benefits of introducing methods training earlier in the academic career:

“It would be so great to have the chance of doing the qualitative and quantitative research courses (Designing and Doing Social Research and Doing Survey Research) in 2nd year or overlapping 2nd/3rd year instead of 3rd year only. This is especially for the survey course. A couple of students and I discussed that we would have been very willing to use our newest statistical skills in our dissertations, but it feels very risky to do that when we start the course at the same time as we start working on our proposals, and I doubt that anyone wants to take that risk unless they already feel quite knowledgeable about statistical methods.

Another argument is that it simply feels very late to introduce statistical knowledge - we've been reading journal articles with statistical analyses since year 1 but it's still taken 5 semesters before we've started learning how those conclusions are reached.

I know that Anthropology is designed so they do a semester of qual and semester of quant in 2nd year, both with actual small projects to be *carried out* in the end (not just three proposals in total as it's the case for us with Soc 2b, DDSR and DSR). Some anthropology students said that it also made the dissertation feel less daunting because they had tried doing a bit of research before.”

- Staff members shared plans currently under development for new Q-step courses that will address some of these concerns.

Comments on Fundamentals 1 and 2

- 1st and 2nd year students were unclear about the “point” of the course, partly because they expected there to be a closer connection to the lectures in Soc 1a and 1b; this,

and the fact that the course is pass/fail, has a negative effect on motivation and attendance.

- 4th year students remember a time before Fundamentals, and can see how it has been designed in response to feedback they had given when they were 1st years (e.g., requests for sessions on study skills).
- Students currently in Fundamentals appreciated the chance to meet other students in their programme.

Comments on optional courses

- More could be done to bring STIS courses to the attention of sociology students.
- Students hope to see more courses, or units within existing courses, that examine regions in the world other than Europe and North America. For example, there are very few courses with a Latin American focus.
- Staff members informed students about initiatives to increase Latin American area studies, as well as the ongoing search for a lecturer in global sociology (with a preference for someone who does research on Latin America). Staff members also commented on the structural and historical reasons contributing to the uneven representation of regions in area studies at British universities.

2. **Modes of assessment:** Students were asked to reflect on the best ways for them to demonstrate their knowledge and learn how to improve performance in future coursework.

- 1st and 2nd year students prefer standard essays to other genres that involve shorter word limits.
- One student described a positive experience with courses in quantitative methods that used weekly assessments.
- Honours level students present said they appreciate being able to propose their own questions. This is a valuable experience and good preparation for the honours project.
- The honours level students attending also said that they liked the division of assessment into one short essay and one long one.
- When asked about innovative assessments, the students said that they can be scary at first, but they went on to acknowledge that it is often worth the extra effort to figure out expectations and how to meet them. Students appreciate courses that are designed to let them choose whether to try unconventional assignments or more standard ones.

3. **Honours project:** Students were asked how the honours project could best enable students to pursue independent research interests.

- Students like the January to December time frame and appreciate all of its advantages.
- Supervisors are very approachable and supportive.
- Workshops and information sessions at the beginning of the research process were very helpful.
- The March deadline for the proposal comes very quickly. Some students are concerned that the proposal sometimes suffers because they are focussing their energies on finishing coursework that is marked.
- Semester 1 of 4th year can get lonely with only one course's regular meetings defining the schedule; a suggestion is to hold regular work in progress sessions.

- Staff members encouraged students to coordinate with their classmates to prevent isolation during the research process.

4. **Sociology Community**: Students were invited to comment on the formal and informal occasions where they can participate in the intellectual life of the department outside of the classroom.

- Students appreciated the effort made to welcome undergraduates to Sociology Seminars, but they were still quite intimidating to attend alone.
- Guest speakers are usually scheduled for Wednesday mornings; students wondered if occasional evening talks are a possibility, as this might be a more convenient time for them.
- Sociology Society has been meeting regularly, but students get the impression that attendance is mainly confined to board members.
- Staff members encouraged students to continue participating in events and coordinate attendance with classmates.

5. **Career development**: Students were asked how the sociology subject area could help to prepare them for pursuing career opportunities beyond graduation.

- Students appreciated the career development sessions held in Fundamentals.
- Students expressed interest in attending panels composed of graduates of the programme discussing possible career paths, as is done in Politics.
- Students discussed their interest and involvement in “Connect.ed”, a new initiative for university alumni to share occupational knowledge and experience.
- Students would welcome the opportunity to do research internships during the summer months to gain experience.

6. **Other matters**

- Joint honours students wondered if it would be possible to choose the subject area of their personal tutor, or if they could have a point of contact in both subject areas. They are concerned about being fully informed of course requirements, course offerings, and synchronizing with the pacing of degree progression in both of their subject areas.
- A student emailed the following comment about scheduling:

Regarding teaching hours: in both 3rd year Social Theory and Doing Survey Research, 1 tutorial hour a week is very very little to get to depths with anything. In social theory, of course because the theories are sometimes complicated and there are a lot of things to clarify before discussion is actually possible. For the survey course, it would be great to have an hour dedicated to practise Stata use and another hour to simply practise and understand the maths we're taught. I don't know if it's possible to have more teaching/contact hours like this, but I think it would make a massive difference for how well both courses are understood and especially for consolidating knowledge.

(Another idea would be to set up learning groups (some departments call them Autonomous Learning Groups, e.g. History and English) where students are assigned

a group and have to meet weekly to discuss/clarify/prepare something for the tutorial. I don't think it's as good an option as being helped by a tutor, but it could at least bring more focus to tutorials if students had already met and discussed some things ahead.)

Report prepared by Dr Lisa McCormick
29 March 2017